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Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Church Sonatas

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American Record Guide (David Mulbury - 2003.05.01)

The American Record Guide

The 17 Church Sonatas are performed here by a string ensemble of 11 "historic" instruments, plus organ (of course, additional instruments--oboes, trumpets, horns, and timpani--are required for several of the sonatas). Unfortunately, the program notes do not divulge anything about the identity of these historic instruments or give any information on the Johann Christian Bach Academy, whose playing is wonderfully precise, detailed, in tune, and polished and will afford a wealth of listening pleasure in these ceaselessly charming works of the young Mozart. Sometimes it becomes a bit too aggressive for my taste and is not always as responsive to the individual character of each sonata as one might wish. But these are minor criticisms.

A major one is the inaudibility of the organ for 90% of the time. To be sure, these are not really organ sonatas where the organ has a solo role except in the last one of the series, K 328 in C. But the organ supplies the harmonic underpinning for a three-voice texture, where the two violins are treated primarily as soprano instruments--not the most ideally formulated of trio textures. Thus, the voice of the organ in this music is absolutely indispensable, yet it can seldom be heard in this recording. Another negative is presented by the random order of the sonatas-not the chronological order we normally expect.

Nevertheless, I would recommend this 1995 recording. It was made in the Christuskirche in Bruhl, near Cologne. While there is not much resonance in the room, the recorded sound is live and quite excellent. Johannes Geffert's playing of the concertante solo part in K 328 is fluent and elegant. My first choices remain the Naxos and AVM recordings, and above all, the E Power Biggs (still unavailable on CD).

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